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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TRIPOLI 000109

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/MAG AND AF/SPG

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TAGS: PREL LY SU AU

SUBJECT: TRIPOLI-BASED DARFUR REBELS BELIEVE GOL'S ATTENTION TO DARFUR HAS DIMINISHED

REF: A) 08 TRIPOLI 871, B) TRIPOLI 70, C) KHARTOUM 92

TRIPOLI 00000109 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: John T. Godfrey, PolEcon Chief.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Representatives of the Sudan Liberation Army/Unity (SLA/U) faction resident in Tripoli find their days largely unoccupied despite renewed fighting in Darfur as Libyan officials have shifted their attention to crises in Gaza and Somalia. The late-2008 lull in fighting weakened their military potential and yielded no progress on rebel unification as Abdul Wahid continued to ignore calls to reunify SLA. SLA/U was heartened by UN/AU Mediator Djibril Bassole's January 7 field visit, but good feelings were dashed by January 24 when they suffered combat losses at Um Saruna that included the death of an important military commander. SLA/U leaders view the Secretary's call for a "No Fly Zone" in Sudan favorably, but worry that an ICC indictment against Bashir will open the floodgates for Islamist foreign fighters to join government forces in Sudan. They are increasingly pessimistic that the GOL will resurrect the Sirte process, in part because the GOL has shifted its attention elsewhere, and are preparing to leave Tripoli for greener pastures. End Summary.

GOL CONTACT WITH SLA/U WANING; UN/AU MEDIATION FILLS THE GAP

¶2. (C) Poloff met with SLA/U representatives Saayid Sharif and Osman Muhammad Busra on January 28 at their Tripoli headquarters (a run-down room at the state-owned Grand Hotel), where they had been "spending time without much to do" since meeting last November. Their contact with the GOL had steadily decreased since late summer, and all but ceased in December when GOL officials became seized with crises in Gaza and Somalia and their efforts to win Libya the chairmanship of the AU (ref B). With UN/AU Chief Mediator Djibril Bassole's planned trip to Tripoli in December 2008 apparently postponed indefinitely and no active movement by the GOL to facilitate talks between rebel movements, Sharif and Busra held out little hope that Libya would ramp up engagement with Darfur rebels in the near term. While personally disappointed that cooperation had slowed, Sharif reported that Bassole's visit with SLA/U leaders in Um Saruna was promising. He quoted Bassole as having characterized SLA/U as a real movement with real support from the people, allegedly contrasting it with Abdul Wahid's faction. SLA/U remains skeptical of the Qatari peace initiative and believes Darfur is an African problem that needs an African solution.

ULL IN FIGHTING ENDS WITH GOVERNMENT OF SUDAN ATTACKS

¶3. (C) The relative lull in fighting through mid-January led to reduced supplies (fewer opportunities to raid government caches)

and little incentive for foreign-based leaders like Abdul Wahid to discuss unification, according to the Tripoli-based SLA/U reps. In addition, the relative calm allowed the GOL, which has limited bureaucratic capacity, to focus on more pressing "Arab crises" in Gaza and Somalia. (Note: the GOL places both Sudan and Somalia within its Arab affairs administrations. End Note.)

While they blamed increased fighting in Darfur on Khartoum's plan to manufacture a crisis in advance of the ICC's expected indictment of Bashir. Sharif and Busra offered no convincing argument as to why Khalil Ibrahim would cooperate in the government's plan to divert attention from international politics. Repeating reports SLA/U leader Abdallah Yehia conveyed to Embassy Khartoum (ref C), our interlocutors said SLA/U positions in Um Saruna were bombed first by GOS Antinov aircraft and then attacked by "over 100" GOS trucks full of men.

Thirteen SLA/U fighters were wounded and another six killed in action, including An'kou Hussain, a key SLA/U commander. Sharif confirmed Yehia was in the camp at the time of the attack, and claimed he spoke to SLA/U field commanders via satphone throughout the day on January 24.

¶4. (C) Despite claiming that the GOS attacked Um Saruna en route to JEM/KI positions further north, both Sharif (who is younger and claims field experience) and Busra were optimistic that renewed fighting would enhance their negotiating position with both other rebel groups and the international community. On materiel and supply, Sharif noted, "when there is war, it is good...you can steal what you need from the government." An uptick in violence also increases the number of SLA/AW commanders who would fight with SLA/U leaders in the field, shifting the balance toward leaders willing to fight and away from those "not talking to anyone in Paris" (i.e., Abdul Wahid). Despite being outnumbered and surrounded, Sharif saw the battle as rejuvenating for the SLA cause, saying, "10 cars for SLA can beat 1,000 government cars because our people believe in the movement."

REBEL THOUGHTS ON US POLICY AND THE POST-ICC WORLD

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¶5. (C) Urging more USG and international involvement in the region, Sharif insisted that a "free zone" for inter-movement negotiations be set up, responded positively to the Secretary's call for a no-fly zone over Sudan, and looked for Western diplomats to focus on the "real movements". Apparently missing the irony of deriding so-called rebel leaders resident outside Sudan while sitting in a Tripoli hotel himself, Sharif noted that "if you count everyone who calls themselves a rebel in London, Geneva or Paris you could have 100 or 1,000 movements, but there are really only two-and-a-half: SLA, JEM, and Abdul Wahid's people who are fighting with us."

¶6. (C) Better understanding of the realities in Darfur is urgent, according to Sharif, because Bashir's indictment will compel Islamist fighters to stream into Sudan, intensifying the fighting and suffering. When asked why Islamists would choose "an African fight" over an Islamist one in Gaza or Somalia, he cited Sudan's open borders and lack of international attention as opportunities for foreign fighters that would deter them from the fight in Gaza. Despite the urgency, rebel leaders hold out little hope that Libya will renew its efforts to engage both governments and rebel movements in earnest and Sharif plans to depart Tripoli February 5 for a coordination meeting in Geneva and will possibly seek to travel to the United States after that. (Note: Sharif holds a passport from The Netherlands and asked about Visa Waiver procedures. End note.)

¶7. (C) Comment: Libya's focus has recently shifted from Darfur to other issues perceived to be more exigent, such as securing Muammar al-Qadhafi's selection as 2009 Chairman of the African Union (septel). Having suffered public humiliation at Sirte in 2007 and been frustrated in their efforts to effect stronger government-to-government cooperation to the south, it appears Libya's Africa hands may have decided to declare diplomatic victory and move on to the broader goal of transforming the AU

into Muammar al-Qadhafi's vision of a United States of Africa. Rebel leaders here have whiled away the past two months waiting for other crises to subside, but appear to be waking up to the reality that Libya doesn't have the bureaucratic capacity to engage effectively on more than a handful of issues at a time. With the confluence of Libya's non-permanent UNSC seat, its newly acquired chairmanship of the AU and the 40th anniversary of the al-Fatah revolution in September 2009, the GOL is stretched thin. End Comment.

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